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THE NEW AMERICAN NAVY.*

BY SIR WILLIAM H. WHITE, K.C.B.

I.

In two handsome volumes, Mr. Long, Secretary of the United States Navy from 1897 to 1902, has given a readable and complete account of work that has been done during the last twenty years in the creation of the new American Navy. His opportunities have been exceptional for tracing the history of that Navy; and his period of office covered the stirring events of the war with Spain, when the modern United States Fleet received its "baptism of fire" and practically determined the issue.

Remarkable vicissitudes have marked the history of the United States Navy during the past forty years. When the Civil War broke out, that Navy was weak and inefficient. Little had been done towards the reconstruction rendered necessary in all navies by the introduction, first of steam propulsion, and subsequently of armor-plating. This naval decadence was due to political causes and not to any loss of American skill in ship-building. The steam frigate "Niagara," which was employed in carrying one-half of the first transatlantic cable, was a proof to the contrary; but public interest was wanting in naval affairs, and no sufficient motive for increased expenditure on the Navy was found during a period of enormous internal development. When the depredations of the "Alabama" on American commerce and shipping, the necessity for establishing a blockade of the Confederate coast, and the conduct of naval operations against fortified ports in the Southern States, made action imperative, the world once more witnessed a wonderful example of the energy and resource of the American people. A great fleet sprang into being in an incredibly short time. It was, of course, to a great extent improvised; but it contained novel types, such as the "Monitor" devised by Ericsson, the shallow-draught ironclads built for service on the great rivers and coast waters, and various classes of unarmored cruisers, some of which were the progenitors of corresponding classes in other navies. Over 600 vessels were built or bought during the war, about one-third being of new construction and many of these being left unfinished on the stocks when the Civil War ended. For a time it seemed possible that the United States would maintain its war fleet in a high rank amongst the navies of the world; but, in the reaction consequent upon the enormous exertions and vast expenditure incurred in the Civil War, the Navy was once more neglected, vessels were permitted to decay on the stocks, and the naval force was allowed to diminish gradually but surely, no sufficient grants being made for its maintenance or extension. Now and again efforts were made to remedy this state of affairs, but until 1883 no notable advance was effected. The cruisers "Chicago," "Boston," and "Atlanta" were then laid down. "These ships," says Mr. Long, "were the nucleus of the new American Navy"; and it is interesting to know that, in their design, an important part was played by two young naval constructors who had been trained in England as my pupils at the Royal Naval College. One of them (Rear-Admiral Bowles) subsequently became Chief Constructor of the United States Navy; a position which he resigned recently after a distinguished official career.

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* "The New American Navy." By John D. Long. The Outlook Co., New York.

This new departure was based on the recommendation of an Advisory Board appointed in 1881, in which were included eminent naval officers, marine engineers and naval constructors. The Board reported that of the sixty-one unarmored cruisers then on the Navy List, only thirty-two were available for service; and it recommended the addition of thirty-eight modern cruisers, as well as thirty smaller vessels for coast service, rams, gunboats and torpedo craft. The immediate result of these recommendations was small, but their report was followed by others from Naval Committees of Congress, and public opinion in the United States was gradually influenced in favor of a strong Navy. This policy has been since enforced by the remarkable writings of Captain Mahan; and has been made permanent by the additions of over-sea possessions to the territories of the United States, as a result of the war with Spain. President Roosevelt has been throughout a strenuous advocate of the need for a strong Navy, and his influence counts for much.

Systematic development of the United States Navy really commenced under the administration of the late Mr. Whitney, who became Secretary of the Navy in 1885. His policy has been well described as embracing the reorganization of the administration of the Navy Department; the construction of a new Navy including every improvement in offensive and defensive power; and the production of all materials used in building war-ships, as well as the construction of the vessels themselves, within the United States. In short, his aim was not merely the development of the United States Navy, but of all home industries connected therewith. Mr. Whitney realized at the outset that it would be advantageous to acquire full particulars and working drawings of modern types of wār-ships built or building in Europe; and, after inquiry, he authorized the Naval Attaché in England to purchase designs for protected cruisers prepared by the writer during his connection with Messrs. Armstrong. These designs were acquired in 1885: one of them was that of the Japanese cruisers "Naniwa" and "Takachiho," which were then approaching completion; the other was a new design for a larger and more powerful vessel, subsequently named the "Baltimore," which took a prominent part in the battle of Manila. Not long after, competitive designs for small battle-ships were invited by public advertisement; and the prize was awarded to a design prepared by the late Mr. William John, who was at that time the manager of the Barrows Ship-building Company. On the basis of this information, contracts were awarded to American firms for the construction of ships which in their structural arrangements, machinery, armament, and equipment compared favorably with corresponding and contemporary classes in European navies. Even when thus limited, it was a bold undertaking to attempt to rival, at one step, in American shipyards, results obtained in other navies after years of continuous effort which had furnished training for skilled workmen. Allowing for the fact that many British ship-builders were engaged by American firms, and that British experience in shipyard machinery and equipment was made available, it is impossible to leave unrecognized the remarkable success which was achieved by American manufacturers.

From that time on, the Navy Department has relied upon American talent for the design as well as the construction of the war fleet. No doubt the closest attention has been given to what has been done in Europe, and particularly in England, in the development of types of war-ships. In many classes the influence of action taken by the British Admiralty on designs prepared in the United States has been both obvious and considerable. It is, however, equally true that in many particulars American designers have made important new departures, and shown the courage, as well as the skill, which is their traditional possession.

The development in the United States of ship-building and engineering establishments of the first class has been a feature of the last ten years. In regard to machinery and mechanical appliances for lifting weights, or transporting materials, many novel arrangements have been introduced by American engineers, and some of their devices have been adopted in Great Britain.

It is a notable fact that the new American Navy has for the most part been built by private firms, some of which have been practically created after orders have been secured for large and costly vessels. The dockyards belonging to the States have been chiefly devoted during this period of development to repairs of ships and machinery, but quite recently it has been decided to build a battle-ship of the largest class in New York Navy-Yard, in competition with sister ships building by private firms.

Remarkable advances have been made also in the creation of manufactories for armor-plating, ship-building materials, ordnance, and projectiles. The "Harvey" process of making armor was brought to a successful issue in the United States, and has been the basis on which subsequent improvements have been made. Altogether, the energy and resource of the American people have been equal to the task imposed by the erection of the new Navy, but, in certain departments, and particularly in regard to the production of armor and armaments, serious delays have occurred, and the completion of ships has been hindered.

It is not possible, nor is it desirable, to trace in detail the history of the new Navy. According to the latest official annual reports, at the end of September, 1903, there were 252 vessels fit for service (including those under repair); in addition, forty-five vessels were under construction or authorized to be built. Of the completed vessels ten were battle-ships of the first class, and one of the second class. The latter ("Texas") cannot be regarded as fit for the line of battle under modern conditions. Two completed vessels are classed as "armored cruisers," but the thickness and extent of their vertical armor on the sides hardly justify their ranking with modern armored cruisers, in which hull-protection is more highly developed. Fourteen protected and three unprotected cruisers of modern types make up the sea-going force now available. In addition, there are ten vessels of the "Monitor" class, some of great age, and one armored ram, useful for coast defence; sixteen torpedo-boat destroyers, twenty-nine torpedo-boats, and eight submarines constitute the torpedo flotilla. The submarines are of the "Holland" type, which was adopted also in the British Navy after successful trials had been made with it in the United States. There are also over forty gunboats of small size and fighting power, and more than fifty auxiliary cruisers, colliers, supply and hospital ships and converted yachts, most of which were added to the Navy by purchase during the recent war with Spain. Tugs and special non-combatant vessels make up the grand total of 252 ships fit for service.

Vessels under construction, or authorized to be built, in September, 1903, represented an enormous relative additional force, including fourteen first-class battle-ships, eight splendid armored cruisers, and nine protected cruisers. Six torpedo-boats appear on this list and three gunboats, but no torpedo-boat destroyers or submarines.

The first battle-ships, worthy of that designation under present conditions, were authorized in 1890; they are three in number and are known as the "Oregon" class. The "Iowa," built two years later, is a distinct improvement upon them. In 1895, two others were authorized (the "Kearsarge" and "Kentucky") in which the novel and much-debated feature of "double-storied" turrets was introduced. In 1896, three vessels of the "Alabama" class were authorized; in 1898, the construction of three others was approved by Congress, including the "Missouri," which has quite recently been the scene of a terrible disaster during target practice with her heavy turret guns.

II.

The war with Spain naturally quickened public interest in the Navy, the value of which was demonstrated in the actions at Manila and Santiago. Five battle-ships of the "Georgia" class were authorized in 1899-1900, and were followed in 1902 by two other vessels of the "Connecticut" class. In 1903, five other first-class battle-ships were authorized. In the present year (1904), the Naval Committee of the House of Representatives has authorized the laying down of another battle-ship, so that eleven first-class vessels are now building.

It is interesting to note how the size and cost of American battle-ships have increased since 1890. The "Oregon" has a displacement of 10,250 tons, and a speed, on trial, of 16¾ knots, with about 11,000 horse-power. The "Vermont," of 1903, has a displacement of 16,000 tons, a trial speed of 18 knots, with about 16,500 horse-power; while the vessels of the "Virginia" class, also of 16,000 tons, are to have engines of 19,000 horse-power, giving a speed of 19 knots. Advocates of ships of more moderate dimensions and cost have not been wanting in the United States, any more than in England. The dangers of putting "too many eggs into one basket" have been enlarged upon, with the result that Congress, against the advice of the technical authorities, insisted, in 1903, upon the building of two battle-ships of 13,000 tons displacement and 17 knots. The balance of naval opinion is undoubtedly against that course, and in the latest battle-ship of 1904, 16,000 tons has been adopted again.

It was intended that the present year (1904) should have witnessed the commissioning of a large number of these powerful battle-ships. Owing to various circumstances, and largely to delays with armor and guns, it is now anticipated that they will not be ready to enter service for another year and a half, or two years. This delay is recognized by the naval authorities at Washington to be very serious. It has been made the subject of a special investigation; and it is believed that the arrangements now made for the supply of armor and guns, as well as for perfecting the plans before the work of construction begins, will prevent a recurrence of this difficulty.

One condition having great influence upon the designs of United States battle-ships, is the comparatively shallow draught necessary for their service. This necessitates greater length than has been adopted hitherto for British battle-ships. The "Vermont" class, for example, are 450 feet long as against the 435 feet of the "King Edward" class in the Royal Navy; and, allowing for differences in weight of armament, equipments, and coal, carried on the trials, they are of practically equal displacement.

"The "armored-cruiser" class of the United States Navy constitutes a very powerful force, to which there is not, in fact, an equivalent, even in the British Navy. No less than eight vessels are now building of about 500 feet in length with displacements on trial from 13,700 to 14,500 tons; whereas in the Royal Navy we have only four vessels of the "Drake" class of about the same length and approximately the same displacement. It is the fashion to speak of these cruisers in the Royal Navy as if they stood alone; but the United States authorities, in taking action at a date subsequent to the construction of the "Drake" class, first of all ordered vessels which, under similar conditions, are of equal length and displacement with the "Drake," then supplemented these by two vessels 500 or 600 tons greater in displacement than the "Drake," and in 1904 seriously considered the construction of two other first-class armored cruisers, of 16,000 tons, but eventually decided to adhere to 14,500 tons. It is anticipated that by the end of 1904 four of these powerful cruisers will be ready for commission, that two others will be completed in 1905, and two more in 1906.

The estimated cost of the latest type of United States line-of-battle ship is $7,775,000, including an armament estimated to cost $1,500,000. The hull, machinery and armor are estimated to cost $6,200,000, or, say, £1,250,000 sterling. For the first-class cruisers, the estimated cost of hull, machinery and armor is about £1,200,000 sterling, and of the armament about £176,000.

Of protected cruisers, there are twenty-three shown on the United States Navy List, and to these may fairly be added the "New York" and "Brooklyn," classed as armored cruisers. It is unnecessary to enter into any detailed description of these vessels, which are still of considerable value. It is interesting to notice, however, that the "commerce destroyers" or "corsair cruisers," "Columbia" and "Minneapolis," which were built about ten years ago and then reckoned as pioneers of a new and important class, are now reported to be under conversion into training-ships for the engineer corps. Their distinctive features were high speed, light armament, and moderate protection; but subsequently it has been concluded that greater fighting capability is essential and the type has not been multiplied.

From the foregoing statements it will be obvious that the United States Navy, although its development was long deferred, has already attained a commanding position; and that, within the next two years, its relative standing will be enormously improved by bringing into line many powerful vessels, battle-ships and armored cruisers, now under construction. There is every reason for believing that this great naval development will be consistently maintained, and that the nation is in strong sympathy with the declared opinion of the President that, under existing conditions, a first-class Navy is essential to the well-being of the United States, to the maintenance of its over-sea possessions, and to the full development of its trade and manufactures.

Publicity in regard to naval affairs is the rule in the United States. In official documents are to be found the fullest details of designs for ships built and building, not even excluding submarines. There is much to be said in commendation of this practice. Secrecy is not easy to maintain; and, in regard to British vessels, information with respect to classes which are treated as strictly confidential can be, and is, acquired by those who are interested in knowing the trend of our naval policy. Without discussing whether the American model should be adopted in England, it is certain that the free publication of reports by the chiefs of the various bureaus in regard to the work proceeding under their direction, the hindrances that have occurred, the new departures that are contemplated, and the actual performances of vessels, have resulted in awakening and maintaining public interest in the United States Navy; and so have furthered the object which those directing its affairs have had most at heart, by rendering possible the provision of large sums required for the creation of a modern fleet.

Certain adjuncts, essential to the maintenance of the fleet, have, as yet, been dealt with only partially in America. The fact is fully recognized by those in authority. Docking facilities, for example, have not kept pace with the increase in the size and numbers of ships. The Navy-yards have not been equipped in the manner requisite for the proper performance of their duties in the repair and maintenance of recent ships, or in the construction of new vessels. No doubt, these requirements will be met in the near future.

The question of manning the American Navy is one of no small difficulty. It was long a reproach that native-born Americans formed only a small proportion of the crews of commissioned ships; and Mr. Long gives amusing illustrations of what formerly occurred, although he takes credit for marked improvement in recent years. He naturally dwells upon the excellent work done by the Navy in the war with Spain, and the ready response then made to the exceptional demands for officers and men. But he recognizes also the necessity for better organization and larger provision in future if the Navy is to be fully efficient.

There is every reason for satisfaction in Great Britain at the position which the United States Navy has attained, and the brilliant prospects for its future. It is unnecessary to dwell upon the well-known fact that there is no disposition in the United States to look upon the British Navy as a possible foe when regulating its programmes of new construction. When dealing with the standard of power requisite for the Royal Navy, it is not usual to attach great importance to the vigorous action taken by the United States in recent years. There are, however, considerations of great moment affecting the relations of the United States to other Naval Powers, especially those who are making strenuous efforts to reach a commanding position in naval force. In considering the "balance of power" for the navies of the world, Englishmen are disposed to believe that every increase made by our transatlantic cousins in their naval force is an additional guarantee for the maintenance of the peace of the world, and the freedom of the sea, and so to welcome the policy which now finds favor in the United States.

WILLIAM WHITE.